

Oakland adult education soon could be thing of the past

By Katy Murphy
Oakland Tribune

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OAKLAND — Patricia Jensen turned her back to the few students who remained in her classroom during the lunch break. She didn't want them to see the grief on her face, an emotion she had tried to conceal when she told them what was happening.

The Edward Shands Adult School in East Oakland, a second chance for many Oakland residents, is likely to close this year — and not for a lack of need. If the budget cuts proposed by the governor in May make it into the final state budget, Shands and most other adult education centers and programs in Oakland, which has offered classes for 139 years, will be history.

"It's a death," Jensen said. "It's a death of hopes and dreams for our students."

The Legislature, notorious for missing its budget deadline, could be months away from making final decisions about school funding. It, too, faces a mounting deficit as its tax revenues plummet. School districts, however, are required to submit balanced budgets by Wednesday. Faced with a deficit of \$110 million and the prospect of losing state funding for its all-day preschools, Oakland school district officials say they had to plan for the

worst.

In doing so, they made a painful choice: to save some of its preschools by gutting adult education.

Many other districts in the Bay Area and statewide, including those in Alameda, Hayward and West Contra Costa County, also plan to balance their budgets by taking money away from adult education,

leaving their programs a skeleton of what they once were.

"I have been telling people all week that the choices we are being asked to make are Faustian choices," Oakland school board member Jody London said at a meeting this week.

For more than a century, adult education programs in California have offered free or low-cost classes to immigrants, refugees, high school dropouts, seniors and the disabled. The programs fall under the umbrella of the K-12 school system, but until last year, school districts couldn't touch the funds for any purpose but adult education. Now that those restrictions have lifted — and districts face increasing pressure to preserve what they can of their core programs — adult education is dying.

Last year, programs for seniors and the disabled fell by the wayside in many East Bay districts.

This year, Oakland might stop offering English as a Second Language, citizenship, career technical education and diploma classes, which would derail the plans of thousands of people who are trying to improve their lives. Cutbacks at local community colleges are happening at the same time, further limiting options for students.

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Brigitte Marshall, director of Oakland's adult education program, said she will be keeping an eye on Sacramento this summer. If the Legislature passes a budget that spares preschool funding, she said, some of the planned cuts to her programs — up to 86 percent — will be restored and Edward Shands might reopen next year. In the meantime, she said, she is looking for low-cost facilities to hold high-school equivalency classes and independent study courses for those who are 15 credits shy of earning a diploma.

Closing Edward Shands, Marshall said, "is really disastrous for that community."

The news that Shands might close came as a shock to Lance White, 20, who dropped out of high school because he needed more than 100 credits to graduate and was about to "age out" of the school system. After working a low-wage job at a corner store, White decided he needed to earn his high school diploma. In May, he began taking basic skills classes at Edward Shands, which gave him hope about his future.

"I took that big leap out to get my education, and they're shutting us down," he said.

Ann Wong, 52, moved to the United States in 1996 from Hong Kong. She said she didn't know much English until last year, when she moved to Oakland and enrolled at the adult school. It quickly became the center of her life. She was hoping to learn enough to land a job as a cashier.

"Where do I go?" she asked, tears running down her cheeks. "What do I do this time?"

In addition to the thousands of students affected by

these cuts, all but about 32 permanent teachers who survived the massive March 15 layoffs will receive notices of possible layoff, Marshall said. Of the few teachers who would remain under the worst-case scenario, Marshall said, most would see a dramatic reduction in hours.

Jensen, who has taught for 30 years at Edward Shands, said she's more worried about the effect of its loss on the city and her students.

"To me, it's always been an oasis of safety, calm and hope in this community," she said. "It's much deeper than jobs."

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